**Welcoming Wisdom** Rev. Phillip J. Romine
Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 148; Mark 9:30-37 Saint Paul, Minnesota
September 22, 2024

All creation. You. Me. We’re all commanded by the Psalmist to praise the Lord…

Easy for you to say, Psalmist.

Easy for you to say in the heyday of the kingdom of Israel. In a time when everyone seems to want to come to the Temple. In a time when your position seems secure. In a time when praising the Lord seems like something everyone’s doing.

It doesn’t feel quite as easy to praise the Lord these days, at least not in the way many of us have been accustomed to it. Parents and grandparents, maybe even some of us sitting at home or here in the pews, might remember the days of released time religious education. Here in St. Paul, particularly between the mid 1920s through the end of World War II, thousands of children were released early from school to walk to nearby Protestant and Catholic churches for religious instruction. The Minnesota History Society reports that at its peak in the 1940s, the Ramsey County Sunday School Association enrolled nearly 2,000 fourth, fifth, and sixth grader in St. Paul Public Schools.[[1]](#footnote-1) Stories of this practice continued well into the 1970s in many areas of the country, particularly the Midwest.

Many people in mainline Protestant churches across the country recall full pews, bustling energy, people inviting one another for dinners and lunches, robust community life pouring forth from church buildings. Even my German host parents mentioned this phenomenon taking place for them too, in the immediate aftermath of World War II. And for some congregations, the historical anomaly of unprecedented church attendance of the 1950s lingered well into the 70s, 80s, even 90s…at least in people’s imaginations.

It is hard not to be critical—of ourselves, of each other, of forces beyond our control—when our memories recall times when it felt easier to praise the Lord in the way we were taught, in the way handed on to us. It is hard not to become defensive or apprehensive about fewer butts in the seats and fewer bucks in the offering plates. It is hard not to succumb to the fear of an unknown, uncertain future, when it is clear that such a future most certainly will not look like the past.

Fortunately for us, the disciples in this morning’s Gospel understand this feeling. Jesus is tired. Prior to the scene we’re introduced to, he’s been transfigured before three of his disciples. He’s performed an exorcism. He’s ready to take some time to debrief and discuss with his followers what all this means.

But when things get serious, when he tries to tell the disciples about his untimely execution, when he tries to convey what’s coming and what matters, because it won’t be like it is now, they don’t want to hear it. Apparently they’d rather squabble about which of them is the greatest.

Fear will do that: make us compete with each other for control, when faced with something that feels like it’s completely out of our control. Especially for Peter and James and John, who accompanied Jesus to the mountain and experienced Jesus being transfigured, seeing Elijah and Moses speaking with Jesus—to have experienced such a moment and then be faced with a future that involves your leader’s uncontrollable death? I can’t imagine the fear they must have felt.

Or maybe I can, because maybe it is the same kind of fear that comes up all too often for those of us who’ve lived long enough to endure tragedies we mostly don’t discuss in polite company. Maybe it is the same kind of fear gripping so much of our political imaginations at the moment. And maybe it is the kind of fear that has reduced congregational life to the constant comparison with an imagined, rose-colored past: a competitive game too often shared by those in the pulpits as well as the pews, and nearly everyone else caught in between.

But as Jesus reminds his followers, fear is neither where the gospel begins, nor it’s desired end. And fear blinds us to the reality in our midst: the people right in front of us, especially those whose voice and volition has been taken from them. What most Bibles translate as “child” in today’s reading can also be translated as “slave.” Either way, the “little one” that Jesus grabs and forces into the scene is someone whose body is subject to the whims of others.[[2]](#footnote-2) This “slave/child” is someone overlooked or ignored. Not unlike many children today, whose care and education is too often not considered a public matters but a private privilege. Children, who are often forced into and out of spaces because others can’t abide their developmentally-appropriate behavior. Not unlike the many shades of slavery still practiced around the world, particularly in most prison systems in the US, built as they are on the legal foundation of the exception clause of the 13th amendment to the US Constitution.[[3]](#footnote-3) Not unlike far too many of our elders, our disabled neighbors, and others hidden away in group care facilities with underpaid and underappreciated staff.

But it is not enough for those whose voices have been long silenced to be merely welcomed. We aren’t welcoming God in our midst so that we can control, contain, or otherwise coerce eternal Wisdom. No, today’s text calls us to see wisdom clearly in our midst, to welcome it just as it’s expressed in the presence wrapped up in very real bodies that have been marginalized and misunderstood.

Only this divine Wisdom can sustain us in the midst of our greatest fears—because it is the same wisdom that has sustained peoples oppressed and brutalized people for millenia.

But we must choose to welcome God’s wisdom. Consistently. Again and again. We must choose to put our properties and our principles in the service of people, not the other way around. We must choose to care at least as much about our epidemic of loneliness as we do about fewer friends in the pews. We must choose to care at least as much about our divestment in childcare and education as we do about fewer kids at the front of our sanctuaries. And we must choose to care at least as much about the integrity of our relationship to the natural world as we do about the structural integrity of our buildings.

Jesus reminds us that it is precisely the people with the least autonomy, the least control over what happens with their bodies, who suffer the most when the care and concern of others turns inward rather than outward.

Welcoming the wisdom of God is hard work: not because the Gospel of Jesus is mysterious or requires degrees to understand, but because it involves caring for all of us, all of creation. And if we strive to be among the messengers bringing forth the gospel of peace; to be part of the light illuminating corners of our world long neglected; to be counted among the salt nourishing generations, we will choose to welcome and be lead by the wisdom peoples long silenced. We will choose to work for a world where the gain of some becomes less and less contingent on the loss of others.

Time will tell whether our buildings, our heritages, our histories, our ways of worshipping and being community together, will continue to feed the Gospel. Time will tell whether we confine our sense of belonging only to those who practice or look or act like us, or to the fullness of God’s creation. Time will tell whether we confine our identity only to the story of our past, or if we marry them to the story of our present unfolding before us.

In the meantime, we are called to be faithful, to keep watch, and to welcome God’s wisdom, using all we’ve inherited, all we’ve built, all we care about, so that all people, all creation, might praise the Lord.

For this most holy work, I say thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00258.xml [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Queering the Lectionary,” Dr. Jimmy Hoke, September 22, 2024: ”…we see the ancient dynamics of enslavement and power play out in the figure of the enslaved body used as a prop in this text. The enslaved person does not speak. Jesus does not ask the enslaved person what they want or need. He doesn’t ask how they want to be received. **He does not ask the enslaved person for their consent before taking their body into his arms.** Even as he urges his students to receive these enslaved persons, he treats enslaved people no better than a typical freeborn Roman. In the ancient Roman world, enslaved bodies were available for use—and abuse—and free people assumed they had the right to enslaved bodies.” <https://www.patreon.com/posts/112130015?display_app_qr=1>, accessed 9/20/24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Slavery and the Modern-Day Prison Plantation,” <https://daily.jstor.org/slavery-and-the-modern-day-prison-plantation/>, accessed 9/20/24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)